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AUTHOR Croft, Blanton
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ABSTRACT

A personalized learning strategy (PLS) was successfully employed in the small group discussion unit of a basic speech communication course. This document describes the rationale behind PLS and discusses ways to implement it. An outline of the small group discussion unit in which PLS was used matches the necessary learning experiences to the learning objectives. A task sheet for the unit and student-suggested topics are provided. (FL)

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Group Discussion In The Basic Speech Course:
A Personalized Learning Approach

by

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Northern Virginia Community College
Woodbridge Campus

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Research related to methods of teaching discussion has focused on the discussion course itself¹ and not on the discussion unit included in the basic speech course. Although the place of discussion has been established in the college curricula² and in the basic speech course³ the best method of teaching the short unit in discussion (or what is now called small group communication) has yet to be established.

The time restriction on the discussion unit in a basic course makes the question of instructional strategy even more pertinent. In the basic course which I taught for three years at Purdue University, the discussion unit was given only a limited amount of time in the syllabus. Usually, two weeks were devoted to the analysis of discussion technique near the close of each semester. At the community college where I now teach, three weeks of the quarter are set aside for small group communication in our basic course Speech 136, Oral Communication.

In this presentation I would like to share with you an instructional strategy for group discussion used at Northern Virginia Community College. During the next few minutes, I want to accomplish the following: 1) Explain the rationale which underlies this approach; 2) Explain the "how" of the strategy; 3) Suggest benefits which have accrued from the three years of use; 4) Answer any question you may have about the strategy.

The first area deals with the educational philosophy on which the strategy is based. At the Woodbridge campus where I teach, a personalized system of instruction has been in operation since 1975. This curricula design is based upon the theory that different people learn different things by different means and at different rates.⁴ Often called individualized instruction, self-paced study or independent study, the Woodbridge design was to package one-third of all curricula so as to provide students with an option in the way they learn. An entering exam is given by the Counseling Department to all new students; upon analysis, the counselor suggests to the student a mode of learning: the P.L.S. course or the conventionally taught one. With this curricula design in mind, the basic speech courses were analyzed and revisions were made accordingly.

In Speech 136, Oral Communications, a basic ten-week course, three units are covered: 1) Process of Speech Communication dealing with communication models, listening and language coupled with a personal experience speaking assignment; 2) Informative Speech Communication which deals with information transfer and culminates in an 8 - 10 minute speech using a visual aid; 3) The Small Group Communication Unit. Of the three, only the last one was re-designed to carry out the Woodbridge curricula design of P.L.S.

The strategy used to "personalize" small group communication was to design a package which gave the group specific guidelines

to follow. These were presented and analyzed on the first day of the three-week unit. Thereafter, the groups work independently of the instructor until the individualized conference at the end of the unit. If you would look at the unit I have given you (it's the pink copy) you can readily see that the learner/or student is specifically told what he is to learn i.e., the Learning Objective column and how he is to learn it i.e., the Learning Experience column. By using a variety of media such as reading from the Verderber book, Communicate, video tapes of groups for models, meetings with the other members of the group, simulation games, paper and pencil forms and finally a video taped 30-minute segment of group interaction, the student has multiple exposures to the technique of small group procedure. Asterisks by certain Learning Objectives point out group tasks.

The P.L.S. approach with group discussion within the basic course has proven to be very successful: 1) When used during the first three weeks, the unit provides students with an opportunity to get to know each other and develop a sense of cohesiveness and commitment. This proves very valuable during the remaining two-thirds of the quarter where listening skills and critical feedback from the audience is emphasized; 2) Provides the instructor with a small group evaluation conference so as to individualize learning for self-improvement; 3) Recruited more students into Speech and away from English 113, an option they enjoy in selection at Northern

Virginia Community College; 4) Provides the older student with specific direction and motivation, an important criteria when one recognizes that the average age of our student population is 29 years. 5) Provides the speech course with positive feedback on course evaluations and has attracted many students to continue electing other speech courses.

At this time, I am open for questions you may have.

¹John Keltner, "The Laboratory Method of Discussion Training at Komar State College," Speech Teacher, VIII (March, 1958) p. 200; William Sattler, "The Use of the Case Method in College Discussion Classes," Speech Teacher, VII (September, 1958), p. 216; William Utterback, "Evaluation of Performance in the Discussion Course at Ohio State University," Speech Teacher, VII (September, 1958), p. 209; Carl Larson and Robert Gratz, "Problem-Solving Discussion Training and T-Group Training: An Experimental Comparison." Speech Teacher XIX (January, 1970), p 54.

²John Keltner and Carroll Arnold, "Discussion in American Colleges and Universities," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XLII (October, 1956), p. 256.

³Norman London, "Professional Attitudes Toward a First Course in Speech and its Requirements in American Colleges," Speech Teacher, XIII (January, 1964), p. 20; James S. Taylor, "A Study of Group Discussion," Southern Speech Journal, XXXIII (Winter, 1967), p. 113; Keltner and Arnold, op. cit., p. 252.

⁴Specific statements of the theoretical base of Personalized Instruction are identified in Michael D. Scott and Thomas J. Young's, "Personalizing Communication Instruction," Communication Education, XXV (September, 1976), p. 211.

UNIT III--SMALL GROUP COMMUNICATION

UNIT OBJECTIVE: AT THE SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF THIS UNIT YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO VERBALLY PARTICIPATE IN A SMALL GROUP PROBLEM-SOLVING DISCUSSION WITH PERSONAL SELF-ANALYSIS USING VIDEO PLAYBACK AND AN INSTRUCTOR CONFERENCE.

<u>LEARNING OBJECTIVES</u>	<u>LEARNING EXPERIENCES</u>
1. DEFINE SMALL GROUP PROBLEM SOLVING.	1.1 ATTEND THE FIRST CLASS AND INTERACT ON SMALL GROUP PRO- CEDURE. SEE TASK SHEET. 1.2 READ VERDERBER, CHAPTER 8, "GETTING ORGANIZED," PP. 119-122.
2. ANALYZE SMALL GROUP PROBLEM SOLVING ON VIDEO PLAYBACK.	2.1 ATTEND THE L.R.C. AND VIEW TAPE #8, "HOW CAN AMERICAN INSTITUTIONS BEST COPE WITH THE SEXUAL EXPLOSION IN THE MEDIA?" USE "GROUP COMMUNI- CATION ANALYSIS," FORM D, P. 239, TEXTBOOK. 2.2 READ VERDERBER, CHAPTER 8, "TALKING PRODUCTIVELY" AND "CARRYING OUT ROLES," PP. 122-134.

UNIT III--SMALL GROUP COMMUNICATION, CONT'D.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- *3. PARTICIPATE IN A
PROBLEM SOLVING GAME.
- 4. DEFINE THE THREE TYPES
OF DISCUSSION LEADERS.
- 5. ANALYZE LEADERSHIP
SKILLS AND LEADERSHIP
EMERGENCE.
- *6. STRUCTURE A DISCUSSION
TOPIC.

LEARNING EXPERIENCES

- 3.1 SCHEDULE CONFERENCE ROOM,
L.R.C., AND VEREALLY INTERACT
WITH YOUR GROUP ON GAME "PLANE
CRASH" OR "LOST ON THE MOON,"
AS PROVIDED BY INSTRUCTOR.
- 4.1 READ VERDERBER, CHAPTER 9,
"WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?" PP. 138
141.
- 4.2 DO WORK SHEET ON LEADERSHIP
AS PROVIDED BY INSTRUCTOR.
- 5.1 ATTEND THE L.R.C. AND VIEW
TAPE #11, "SHOULD CAPITAL
PUNISHMENT BE REINSTATED IN
THE U.S.?" USE "LEADERSHIP
ANALYSIS," EVALUATION FORM,
P. 243, TEXTBOOK.
- 6.1 MEET WITH YOUR GROUP IN
CONFERENCE ROOM, L.R.C., FOR
ONE HOUR.

UNIT III--SMALL GROUP COMMUNICATION, CONT'D.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

7. IDENTIFY FIVE TYPES OF FALLACIOUS REASONING COMMONLY FOUND IN GROUP DISCUSSIONS.
- *8. PARTICIPATE IN PLANNING FOR VIDEO TAPE SESSION OF PROBLEM SOLVING.
9. RESEARCH A PROBLEM FOR GROUP DISCUSSION.
- *10. PARTICIPATE IN A 30-MINUTE PROBLEM SOLVING SEGMENT TO BE VIDEO TAPED.
11. ANALYZE VERBAL INTERACTION OF YOUR GROUP.

LEARNING EXPERIENCES

- 7.1 ATTEND THE L.R.C. AND VIEW THE AUDIO TAPE PRESENTATION, "CLEAR THINKING: HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR REASONING SKILLS," (CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES).
- 8.1 MEET WITH YOUR GROUP IN CONFERENCE ROOM, L.R.C. FOR ONE HOUR.
- 9.1 ATTEND THE L.R.C. AND DO TASK #10, TASK SHEET.
- 10.1 SCHEDULE A TIME IN T.V. STUDIO WITH ATTENDANT AND FOLLOW-UP WITH TAPING.
- 11.1 ATTEND THE L.R.C. AND CRITICALLY VIEW YOUR OWN GROUP AS TAPED EARLIER.
- 11.2 WRITE OUT THE ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON PLAYBACK EVALUATION FORM AS PROVIDED BY INSTRUCTOR.

UNIT III--SMALL GROUP COMMUNICATION, CONT'D.

*12. EVALUATE WITH INSTRUCTOR
IN A CONFERENCE YOUR
PERFORMANCE AS TAPED.

12.1 SET UP CONFERENCE TIME WITH
INSTRUCTOR AND BRING "PLAY-
BACK EVALUATION SHEET."

* GROUP PERFORMS TASK.

Task Sheet

1. Divide into groups of five or six discussants at first class meeting.
2. Select a group leader by a democratic process; your group may decide to perform as a leaderless group.
3. Select a subject area for problem solving; follow these guidelines:
 - a. Select a problem that is significant and relevant.
 - b. Select a problem that can be investigated prior to the discussion--research potential inherent.
 - c. Select a problem that can be profitably discussed in the time allotted in class.
 - d. Select a problem that includes some controversy--pros and cons definable.
4. Word the topic in an answerable form for problem-solving. Use the following guidelines:
 - a. Phrase the problem as a question.
 - b. Phrase the problem clearly.
 - c. Phrase the problem impartially.
 - d. Restrict the scope of the problem--certain problems and expertise outside the knowledge of the group.
5. In the first group meeting, define every word in the question--definitions which dispel differing private interpretation of what the problem means. Use the following guidelines:
 - a. Clarify vague and ambiguous words.
 - b. Clarify any unfamiliar words.
 - c. Indicate the exact scope of the problem.
 - d. Depict the problem objectively.
6. Plan to investigate Step Two, "Analysis of the Problem" between now and _____. This will involve research and reading. This will include the following:
 - a. History of the Problem.
 - b. Effects of the Problem.
 - c. Causes of the Problem.
7. Plan to do Step Three, "Identify All Possible Solutions" by assigning each discussant the role of investigator. The following guides should be kept in mind:
 - a. Identify conditions to be met by acceptable solutions.
 - b. Identify all possible solutions.
8. Step #4 and Step #5 of the problem-solving process should be completed by _____. Step #4 - Evaluation and Selection of Best Solution
Step #5 - Plan of Action (Implementation of group solution).

9. A group must record its solution in outline form and hand it to instructor before departure on _____. Solutions will be a part of class records and models for next quarter's class.
10. Prepare yourself for the problem-solving by doing these things:
 - a. Organize your own thoughts about the problem.
 - b. Research and record additional information.
 - c. Evaluate your own materials.
 - d. Re-organize your findings--discard trivia.
 - e. Construct a rough outline of all possible solutions you can think of and bring them to _____ meeting.
11. Each person should keep a record of all sources used in the research and turn in to instructor their individual bibliography. This is not a group activity.
12. Each person is responsible for arranging playback time in order to answer the self-evaluation questions. This form must be filled out prior to your instructor conference at the end of the unit.

Student Suggested Topics

1. What procedures should be implemented to decrease the commercialization of Christmas?
2. Should the U.S. adopt a total program of socialized medicine?
3. Should federal government action be taken to control the cost of funerals?
4. Should a system of no fault insurance be adopted for the state of Virginia?
5. Should the labor unions adhere to compulsory arbitration enforced by federal action?
6. Should the extension of I-66 be completed to the District boundary?
7. Should the elementary schools of Virginia adopt the total ungraded program in grades 1-6?
8. Should trade with the Soviet Union be totally unrestricted?
9. Should handguns be banned in the U.S.?
10. Should the use of marijuana be legalized in the fifty states?
11. Should the waiting period of marriages be uniform in the fifty states?
12. Should marriage as a legal institution be discontinued?
13. Should the federal government attempt to restrict the population growth?
14. Should sterilization be used as a control device for welfare (A.D.C.) recipients?
15. Should required courses at Northern Virginia Community College be abolished?
16. Should Virginia adopt a system of bi-annual auto inspection?
17. Should the U.S. trade wheat for oil with the Soviet Union?
18. Should the federal government take action to preclude auto insurance cancellations?

For additional suggested topics, see -- "For Decision-Making Discussions," p. 332 of M & E, Principles of Speech Communication (a total of 33 more topics are listed for your assessment). In the IRC--Reserve Room.

Suggestion: Read transcript of C.B.S. discussion-program, "Who Will Play God?" p. 391-403, M & E, Principles of Speech Communication, 6th ed. In LRC, reserve room.